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SUBJECT: MINISTRY OF HAJJ AND RELIGIOUS AFFAIRS: EDUCATORS OF THE PUBLIC?

¶1. (SBU) Ministry of Hajj and Religious Affairs (MHRA) Deputy Minister Shafiq Samim and Senior Advisor Sharif Robaty said in a 2/4 meeting that the MHRA educates the public on a variety of secular and religious issues. The MHRA has used its influence over government-funded mosques to call on their leaders to support the elections, and the government's health, education, and other programs. Samim asked for increased international community support.

MINISTRY AS VOICE OF THE GOVERNMENT

¶2. (SBU) Samim said one of MHRA's primary roles was to work through state-funded mosques to educate the people, whether on religious or secular matters. MHRA supports programs to work through Ulema (religious scholars) to inform the people about the elections, vaccination campaigns, the negative impacts of narcotics, and other issues. The MHRA even supports programs to reduce popular questions and concerns about international forces.

MINISTRY'S PROGRAMS TO SUPPORT WOMEN'S RIGHTS

¶3. (SBU) For example, the MHRA works with the Ministry of Women's Affairs on a family planning program called the "Families Health Initiative." The program operates in 18 provinces and over 100 districts. The Ministries provide funding for the Ulema to educate their followers on family planning issues by advising the people on Islam's views on such issues, and by urging them to visit local hospitals and clinics for family planning assistance. Such a program, Samim said, was in keeping with the MHRA's commitment to gender equality.

¶4. (SBU) Samim declared the MHRA had a "good ratio" of female employees to male employees, and had sent a "good number" of women on the Hajj as guides and facilitators. The Ministry also had programs devoted to women's rights, and to combating violence against women.

MHRA SUPPORT OF MOSQUES EQUALS CONTROL OF THE MESSAGE IN THOSE MOSQUES

¶5. (SBU) Samim said that there were 500 registered and an estimated 1,000 more unregistered mosques in Kabul. At state-sponsored mosques, Ulema receive a \$100/month stipend to help meet mosque expenses. In return, the MHRA enjoyed influence over the messages delivered by the Ulema to their congregants. It even monitored what the Ulema were saying to their followers. The MHRA did not have the resources to support all mosques, and as a result had no control over the conduct or message of unregistered mosques. The MHRA had not found any instance of an Ulema at a government-sponsored mosque preaching against the GIRoA, though he acknowledged that there were "undoubtedly" some Ulema that preached against the government in private mosques.

¶6. (SBU) Samim acknowledged the MHRA's weaknesses, such as

in the area of media relations. He thought the MHRA could improve its performance with support from the international community (IC), which refused to help because MHRA was a religious organization. He insisted the Ministry was more than that, as shown by its non-secular educational activities. With support, the MHRA could broaden its influence, and thus better control the message the people received from the Ulema.

MINISTRY SUPPORT OF ELECTIONS

¶7. (SBU) The Ulema had been very vocal in support of the 2004 elections, and were now trying to educate the people about the 2009 elections. Samim complained, however, that neither the IEC nor UNDP-Elect had sought MHRA's assistance on the 2009 elections. (The IEC has worked extensively with the Ulema Council, which is not part of the Ministry, and considers its partnership with religious leaders to have been key to the success of voter registration in the conservative, volatile south.)

¶8. (SBU) Samim was willing to support a program encouraging women to participate in the elections, but wanted support from the IC, because the GIRoA did not have funds to support more ulema. (The day after this meeting, Samim recorded a message encouraging women voters to participate in the 2009 presidential elections, without promises or commitment of support to the MHRA.)

MHRA ALSO SUPPORTS RELIGIOUS SCHOOLS

KABUL 00000510 002 OF 002

¶9. (SBU) The MHRA created, in conjunction with the Ministry of Education, Dar Ulums (religious secondary schools) in 20 of Afghanistan's 34 provinces, at a cost of \$1 million per Dar Ulum (pronounced "ooloom"). The schools were funded both through the Ministry and through private support. Each Dar Ulum had student bodies of 1,000 - 1,500 students, some of whom were reconciled Taliban. The Dar Ulums taught students in grades 7-14, while the madrassas taught students in grades 1-6. (Though regular Afghan high schools end at grade 12, the Dar Ulums provide additional, university-level training to grade 14.)

¶10. (SBU) Samim said 40% of the Dar Ulum curriculum focused on modern education, i.e. languages, computers, etc., while the other 60% was religion-based. The students' favorite courses, he added, were on computers. Each Dar Ulum had 10 computers it had received from either the U.S. or the UK (he could not say from which USG agency). Samim said that each Dar Ulum needed to have at least 50 to meet student demand.

¶11. (SBU) Samim added that Dar Ulums are facing a teacher shortage. To address a shortage of Afghan-trained mullahs, the MHRA has hired Afghan mullahs who received their training outside Afghanistan. For example, 100 mullahs with Medina University degrees (Saudi Arabia) were living in Nuristan, but had no jobs. After being hired, these mullahs adopted a pro-government attitude, in a province known to be very conservative and not particularly supportive of the government.

ORGANIZATION OF THE ISLAMIC CONFERENCE (OIC) MEETING TO BE HELD IN KABUL

¶12. (SBU) Samim claimed he convinced OIC Secretary General Professor Ekmeleddin Ihsanoglu to sponsor an OIC meeting in Kabul in the near future, to encourage anti-government mullahs to support the GIRoA. He had no further details at that time. (The OIC website's calendar of events had no mention of such a meeting at this writing.)

¶13. (SBU) Samim has served as Deputy Hajj Minister for the past 8-9 months. Before joining the Ministry, he was the Senior Advisor on Religious Affairs to then-Education Minister Hanif Atmar. Samim said that since becoming Deputy Minister at MHRA, he had consulted with representatives of the governments of Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, Qatar and others on how to better use the ulema to minister to the people. He has also taught at Medina University, which has recently begun admitting women for the first time.

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